CHRISTMAS EVE
December 24, 2003

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Isaiah 9:2–7
Psalm 98
Luke 1:26–35, 38
Luke 2:1–12
Luke 2:13–20

Startle us, O God, with your truth and your love.
Help us to hear the story of the birth again, as if for the first time.
Be with us in these quiet moments
that we might hear the singing of the angels
and then, quietly, personally, welcome him into our hearts:
Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Amazing things happen on Christmas Eve! For one thing, a lot of people go to church—more people than on any other day of the year except for Easter. Location, it is said, is everything, and we do have "location" here at Fourth Presbyterian Church. And so every year on December 24 we get calls that go something like this: "We're coming in for dinner at the Drake—been doing it for years—and then we'd like to come over for Mass. Would you save us eight seats for midnight Mass?" It's a dead giveaway that they aren't Presbyterians, and I've always imagined that there are probably an equal number of Presbyterians over at Holy Name Cathedral thinking they're in a Protestant church.

Amazing things happen. People get testy when they discover there's not only no room in the inn tonight but no room in their church! A few years ago, a fight actually broke out in a prominent Manhattan church when a regular was told by an usher that he couldn't sit in his pew. So a heartfelt thank you to all the ushers everywhere this evening, all doing their best to make sure that everyone gets to participate in the festivities. And a word of thanks to those who couldn't get in and are watching on closed-circuit television. And a warm Christmas greeting and welcome to all: regulars, guests, and everyone in between—even if you think you are celebrating Mass at Holy Name Cathedral.

Amazing and wonderful things happen on this evening. People reach out to one another in acts of kindness and friendship and generosity, all inspired by the birth of a child in Bethlehem.

One of those wonderful and amazing things happened eighty-nine years ago tonight. On December 24, 1914, two great armies, hundreds of thousands of British, French, and German soldiers, faced each other along a front that extended along the border between France and Belgium. It was a terrible war. Troops were dug in in deep trenches cut into soggy, muddy soil, lighted by candles and flashlights. It was a constant struggle to keep the mud walls from collapsing and the whole apparatus from flooding completely. Just 50 to 100 yards away was the enemy trench. Each side's trench was protected by rolls of barbed wire. In between was no-man's-land. Each side posted snipers to shoot anything that moved in the opposite trench. Hand grenades were thrown, artillery shells were lobbed, occasional charges up out of the trenches were launched, almost always with terrible results. The trenches were close enough that men in one could hear the enemies' voices. Occasionally, Germans would call out, "Engländer!" And the British would call back, "Jerry!" or "Fritz!"

As the first Christmas approached, troops on both sides received packages from home to boost morale. British troops received a Princess Mary Packet, containing cigarettes, pipe tobacco, and a greeting card from the king. Each solider also received a plum pudding and Cadbury chocolates. The German Christmas package contained tobacco, a Meer Schaum pipe with the profile of Crown Prince Frederick Wilhelm. Separately from this, German troops also received gifts of sausages and beer.

And one thing more: the German government sent a lot of Christmas trees to the troops in the trenches. As the sun moved across the sky on December 24, 1914, something strange began to happen. The shooting slowed down and then came to a halt. No one issued an order. Soldiers on both sides simply stopped shooting.

As the late afternoon dusk turned to darkness, British troops, peering through the gloom, saw the most amazing thing. Christmas trees with lighted candles on the parapets of every trench. All up and down the line it happened. German troops displayed the Christmas trees their government had sent to the front, displayed them so that their British enemies could see them.

A German voice called out into the silent dark, "A gift is coming now!" The British dove for cover, expecting a grenade. What came across was a boot filled with sausages and chocolate. The British scurried to find one of the Princess Mary Packets, a plum pudding, and a Christmas card from the king to send in reply.

Then the singing started: patriotic songs, military songs, drinking songs, at first: one side, followed by applause from the opposite trench, then the other. And then it was eerily quiet—the lighted Christmas trees, the

darkness. “Stille Nacht, Heilege Nacht,” the Germans sang. “Silent Night, Holy Night.” All up and down the front it spread, for miles and miles: “Stille Nacht, Heilege Nacht.” All is calm—and all is bright.

The British troops were spellbound. Some joined the singing. Some sang English hymns. As the sun rose on Christmas Day, signs emerged and voices from both sides, “You no shoot. We no shoot!” Brave soldiers emerged from both sides—unarmed—and walked slowly, ever so cautiously, up out of the trenches into no-man’s-land and met in the middle, shook hands awkwardly, and exchanged Christmas greetings. Up and down the line, spreading north and south, a spontaneous Christmas truce. Gifts of cigarettes, candy, sausages, plum puddings, and chocolates were exchanged—and then uniform insignia, brass buttons, and belt buckles, more singing and drinking. At several places along the Western front, football games—soccer games —were played. When I asked Calum MacLeod if he had ever heard of the Christmas truce, he said, of course, “Everyone in Britain knows about that.” And he told me that Paul McCartney wrote a song about it, about the men coming out of the trenches and playing a game of football. “Pipes of Peace” is the name of the song.

The truce continued Christmas night and into the second day. And then after a week or so, it slowly deteriorated, and the shooting resumed. Six thousand deaths per day for the next forty-six months.

It’s all in a book, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce,* by Stanley Weintraub. At the end, the author, a professional historian, reflects, “The Christmas Truce has lingered strikingly in memory . . . a potent symbol of the stubborn humanity within us” (p. 173).

Amazing things happen on Christmas Eve because a child was born long ago in a stable in Bethlehem of Judea.

We all know the story: a young Jewish woman and her husband, traveling for days from Nazareth south to Bethlehem, outside of Jerusalem, because the Roman emperor had ordered a census. The young woman is pregnant; the journey is hard. When they arrive in Bethlehem, the inn is already full, so they spend the night in the stable. During the night, the woman gives birth to her son, and she and her husband wrap him tightly to keep him safe and warm and use the manager for his first cradle.

That story is about love. The love of a woman and a man for each other; their love for their child—love they didn’t even know was in their hearts until he was born, an experience common to all parents. And it is about the love that baby had, when he became a man, for his friends, his nation, his religion, his people—all sorts of people: insiders and outsiders, rich and poor, righteous and sinners, fishermen and lawyers and tax collectors and

prostitutes. The story is about his strong love, which expressed itself finally when he gave away his own life.

It is a kind of universal story, which people of strong faith and little faith and no faith at all somehow can understand.

Christian faith believes that what this story is really about is God and God's love. That's what God is like. That is how God's love comes into life: not in some dramatic display of heavenly pyrotechnics, not in high drama—the sky opening and trumpets playing fanfares—but in human birth and a mother's love and a baby's first cry.

Why would God do such a thing? The answer, I think, is that God wants the world to be a better place, and the best way to do that, God knows, is by changing human hearts and dispositions and attitudes—one by one by one. God's methodology, if you will, is to let each of us and all of us know that we are loved. That's what the story is about and that is why we have all crowded in here tonight and why millions and millions of people are sitting in churches all over the world tonight, singing carols, lighting candles, and listening to the story, pondering the mystery of God's love for the world and —miracle of miracles—God's love for me and for you, whomever you are.

God has a plan, and it is to make the world a kinder, better, more godly place by transforming you—maybe to save your life, maybe to give you your life back, maybe to give you the courage to live into your future facing whatever is ahead with grace and a little serenity—by telling you that you are loved, forever and ever. God's plan, I think, is that sometime on Christmas Eve, we will conclude that maybe the best thing that you and I can ever do, the best way to live the rest of our lives, is in that love, sharing it, spreading it around, reaching out to one another, across all the barriers that divide us, like those brave soldiers did for one shining moment eighty-nine years ago this night.

God came into human history in that child. God comes to you and me personally in the story of the child's birth to tell each of us that we are loved with an unconditional and infinite love—and then to send us out into the night and Christmas Day and all the days that are ahead to live that amazing and wonderful love for the rest of our lives.

And so, please do—

> Come to Bethlehem and see
> Him whose birth the angels sing:
> Come, adore, on bended knee,
> Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.

Thanks be to God.